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Observing the Effects of the Unknown

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INTRODUCTION

English language teaching may be the most introspective of all professions. Given the enormous amount of academic research constantly being conducted and reported on in the literature and at conferences, it is hard to find any aspect of English teaching that has not been called into question, dissected, reconsidered, reinvented, and revived. In Japan alone there are numerous organizations, publications, and regular meetings and conferences devoted to English language teaching.

What we teachers do in the classroom, however, is not always a matter of choice: decisions like course content and text materials are often made by Directors of Studies or Chief Instructors; and matters such as class size, room assignments, and scheduling are often made by overseeing administrators. In formal education, there are few matters about which the individual teacher can make decisions–many junior high school teachers have autonomy over only the first few minutes of class, when they exchange greetings with the students and perhaps try to squeeze in a quick warmup activity. Many private language schools have developed their own teaching method and train teachers how to use every second of lesson time, down to how many times to have students repeat a model spoken by the teacher.

Decisions are most often made for the teacher for purposes of quality control and uniformity of placement and grading. From a pedagogical perspective, these measures (at least in theory) can help to facilitate the teacher's job of conducting classroom lessons. Against that backdrop, then, what constitutes a "good," "smooth," or "successful" lesson? Many teachers would say that the best lessons are those in which everything goes as planned, and nothing unexpected happens.

Wanted or not, however, the unknown is a constant challenge faced by teachers. Materials development, curriculum planning, lesson planning, and the assigning of homework can all be viewed as attempts to minimize the degree to which the teacher will have to deal with the unexpected during the lesson. While it is of course a matter of professionality to be prepared for one's lessons, there is also such a thing as being overprepared, to the point where the urge to "follow the script" may preempt the opportunity to work off the students' reactions and receptivity to the lesson. Similarly, focusing on trying to circumvent the unexpected is analogous to practicing preventive medicine but ignoring curative medicine–there is no accounting for what will happen if and when the unexpected does arise. Like any other endeavor, one cannot know how to deal with the unexpected without any experience doing it. Therefore, it is arguable that allowing for, or even creating a relatively controlled environment for, the unexpected can have its merits.

The introduction of a new curriculum, including required English, gave me the opportunity to reexamine my intentions and objectives as a teacher, the role that planning plays in my teaching, and the role of the unexpected in my lessons.

CURRENT SITUATION

Considering how much time and effort is invested in developing

courses and materials, there is an understandable temptation to try to get as much mileage as possible out of them by using them as long and as often as possible. Sticking with the tried and true can, of course, also limit the risk of encountering the unknown. Unfortunately, this can lead to a sense of complacency wherein one becomes overly comfortable teaching the same courses, using the same materials, conducting the same activities, even telling the same jokes year after year.

Perhaps the most important factor governing the unknown is the extent to which the lesson involves interaction with the students. As long as the students can open their mouths, there is a certain "X factor" over which the teacher may have little or no control. Teacher-centered, controlled activities–typically rote work like pattern practice, substitution drills, and repetition–give the teacher more control over the amount and variety of student production and channel it largely if not completely towards the correct utterance of designated target language points (structures, expressions, phonemes, etc.). In contrast, more student-centered activities such as discussion and presentation open the door to a broader range of not only language but also content, and therefore a greater chance for the unexpected to occur.

Many teachers seek to limit spontaneous communication in the classroom for good reasons, generally to avoid delicate situations in which students' feelings might inadvertently be hurt. However, trying to maximize control over lessons can cross over to other practices such as banning certain topics from lessons and relegating students' questions to before or after lessons. Even if it comes from the best of intentions, it ultimately constitutes censorship of materials and topics rather than selection of materials and topics.

Regardless of the methodology employed, students are always capable of the unexpected. Every new class involves at least some new stu-

dents; more than the simple matter of new names and faces, however, new students can also be new kinds of students. Non-mainstream students are still relatively rare in a homogeneous setting such as Japan, but there are more exceptions than they were a decade or two ago.

- Returnees (帰国子女): The Japanese term for "returnee" (帰国子女) does not have a strict definition. Like many neologisms in the Japanese language, it seems to have quite a wide range of interpretation as to whether the individual lived in an English-speaking country or any foreign country, how long the individual lived there, the kind of education he/she received during that time, and at what age he/she began to live there. Even among institutions that have special classes for returnees the definition varies (Twaronite, 1996). For the purposes of this paper, I will apply what seems to be the most common grouping of factors: living abroad for a continuous period of at least two years, beginning before adulthood. With that in mind, where they lived is not a major factor–many non-English-speaking countries have international schools where students can acquire near-native English proficiency; on the other hand, returnees from English-speaking countries might have gone after their linguistic formative years, might have been cloistered in Japanese communities and had little exposure to local residents, or simply might not have applied themselves religiously to improving their English skills. The total number of Japanese children from elementary school age to junior high school age living overseas has been near or over 50,000 for the last decade, and has topped 50,000 every year since 2000 (MEXT, 2005). While some schools have sufficient numbers of returnees to offer special English classes for them, most do not. At some schools, returnees are automatically integrated into regular classes that are much too easy for them, they have few or

no linguistic peers for pair or group work, and there is a potential for friction if the teacher is not a native speaker (overly Westernized students might challenge the teacher outright, Japanese teachers of English are subject to the pressure of being judged by someone whose English is superior to theirs, etc.). At others, they are either officially exempted from those course requirements by the institution or unofficially excused from class by the individual teacher. The mere presence of a returnee in a class creates a certain element of the unknown for the teacher. Will the student prove so far above the level of the class that the lessons are boring? Will the student ask a question the teacher can't answer or, worse yet, correct the teacher's mistakes? Will the student mouth a spontaneous expletive after making a mistake?

- Non−returnees with international experience : A one-month homestay in an English-speaking household can affect a youngster's confidence and affinity for English (Tani-Fukuchi, 2005, 4)–as is the case with teaching, the effects may not be immediately perceptible, but over the course of time they may actually be quite profound.
- Students with special needs : Despite more than 130 years of experience offering specialized education for students with special needs (aka *handicapped students*, *disabled students*, *physically/intellectually/emotionally challenged students* and other less politically correct euphemisms), the number of these students entering mainstream schools is lower than desired (MEXT, 2003). These students often require different approaches to teaching, including language teaching. My first experience teaching students with physical disabilities was particularly challenging because it involved a visually impaired student in one class and hearing-impaired student in not only a different class but a different course altogether. My teaching

has long featured substantial use of audiovisual materials, but I had to modify if not abandon every such lesson that semester. The teacher has to not only attend to the student's needs, but also make the other students' understand their role in sharing that responsibility, then estimate–together with the rest of the class–how the course of any lesson or activity may be affected as a result.

- International students : The number of international students in Japanese universities is also on the rise, reaching 117,000 in May 2004 (MEXT, 2005), and with them come new considerations. My Study Skills classes were not affected, probably because they were in the Department of English Communication, but it was discovered that a number of foreign students had not completed the equivalent of Japanese high school English, so a special tutorial had to be organized for them.

It is clear that teachers have less control over what may happen in the English classroom than in the past, and it is certainly true that the unexpected can create problems for teachers. On the other hand, we can also exploit the unexpected to our–and our students'–advantage. Many of my fondest memories as a teacher relate to spontaneous moments that I had not planned. Furthermore, the more spontaneity there is in a lesson, the less focus there is on the teacher and the less pressure there will be on the teacher to carry the burden of "making the lesson succeed."

BACKGROUND

The introduction of a new curriculum is an entirely different experience from teaching a new course or a new class of students. In addition to new faces and names, new materials and activities, there is an element of the unknown in new objectives, new approaches, and a new pro-

file of student attracted by the definition of the new curriculum. At the same time, it can create a framework within which teachers can pursue new kinds of classroom-based research. In 2005, the introduction of a new curriculum at a private women's university in Japan combined with my background of teaching mixed-level, content-based classes in both private language schools and university to give me the opportunity to experiment. I decided to focus on the new experience of teaching parallel content-based courses at different levels.

Personal Experience

My introduction to content-based teaching came almost 20 years earlier, in the English program at an interpreter training school for adult learners. The English program offered training for those interested in future work as interpreters and translators, in the form of skills training (e.g., intensive and extensive listening, anticipation, paraphrasing, summarizing) and content (heavy emphasis on current events and social issues, drawn from TV news reports and newspaper and magazine articles). That experience enabled me to branch out to content-based courses dealing with a wide variety of other subjects involving popular media (e.g., music for communication, literature and film) and eventually my personal areas of interest (Western humor, mixed media). After 15 years of teaching and materials development in private language schools, I made the transition to university teaching. In three years of adjunct teaching at six different universities in Tokyo, my teaching assignments ran the gamut from specific courses with narrowly defined objectives and assigned materials to general English courses in which I had complete autonomy about classroom content and materials. I have always felt constrained by textbooks, as they generally presume that all students grouped into a designated level know and don't know

the same things and many textbook activities are designed for students to complete successfully (thus circumventing the value of learning from one's mistakes). Whenever I used textbooks in the past, I found myself constantly digressing to related language and topics and then supplementary and complementary materials. I discovered that what really excited me as a teacher was what was not scripted by the textbook: the eye-opening discovery of what lay behind a mystery, the satisfaction of conquering earlier failures, spontaneous reactions and questions. I loved the purity of those reactions, even when they were not voiced in English.

This was even more true when I used authentic materials or no materials at all. With the door open to students to contribute at any time, I found myself more comfortable as a facilitator rather than as the orchestrator of everything that happens in the classroom. Student autonomy may be a bit daunting when dealing with younger, less mature learners, but I benefited from finding my footing as a language teacher with adult learners. When I moved into university teaching, it quickly became aware that many students felt anywhere from apathetic to hostile towards English. This was exacerbated by various other factors: the leveling of students in some schools, with everybody knowing which were the lowest levels; an average class size of 50 at another school; being told at yet another school to be sure to run a blank copy through the Risograph machine after making copies so students wouldn't be able to cheat by running off additional copies; and being told as part of my orientation to another school that it was up to me how much Japanese to use in my lessons. On the first day of class, many students–even fourth-year students in the English Department–at one school were clearly shocked to hear me begin the lesson in English. It immediately became clear that, much more important than how much English I could teach

them, my primary responsibility was to try to change their attitude– towards English, the study of English, and university study in general.

My basic teaching approach was already fairly well defined when I started teaching in university: somewhat relaxed rather than strict, giving deliberately incomplete or vague instructions to make the student try to work out the details among themselves, flexible lesson plans allowing me to adjust to student numbers and moods. Deliberate attempts to allow for the unexpected can also be seen in my general approach to teaching: encouraging students to speak out rather than calling on individuals to answer questions, never scripting lessons, pacing around the room throughout lessons, constantly digressing from "teacher talk" to engage the students (both individually and collectively) in tangential chat or banter, frequent detours from from the subject matter at hand for incidental vocabulary work, diagnostic error correct, etc.. University classes being generally larger than classes in private language schools, it took me longer to remember all of the students' names and (partially towards that end) it took me a while to grasp how much lesson time I could devote to speaking with students on an individual basis. However, there proved to be no need for major changes in my approach, perhaps largely due to the fact that that approach is relatively flexible to begin with.

The New Curriculum

The new curriculum stipulated at least two semesters of required English for first-year students in all five departments (English Communication students had four), with Study Skills in the spring semester and Reading/Listening in the fall semester. Study Skills was a natural choice as the first required English course for all incoming students, considering that there had been growing concern in recent years about

the preparedness of Japanese high school graduates to undertake university-level studies, whether in English or in other subjects (Merner).

The program was divided into three levels: the highest level in each department was the "Challenge" class, the lowest was the "Support" class, and all others were collectively labeled as "Regular" classes. In the spring semester, I would teach Study Skills to the Challenge and Support classes. As a rough measure of the difference in levels, the range of scores on the G-TELP (which we use as one criterion for placement, together with a writing sample and–only in the English Communication Department–an oral interview) was as follows. The full score is 300 points.

LEVEL	LOW SCORE	HIGH SCORE	MEAN SCORE
Support	74	120	100.0
Regular 2	100	149	121.1
Regular 1	131	192	163.3
Challenge	187	244	203.5
Entire Department	74	244	148.3

PURPOSE

I have often had occasion to conduct the same activity in different classroom situations. As is the case when one teaches the same lesson to different classes at the same level within the same program, the students' response and receptivity to the materials and activities can vary for any number of reasons including chemistry (mainly due to existing friendships and familiarity with each other), time of day (first-period classes are often hard to get started because of stragglers, many students get sleepy in classes immediately following the lunch break), and whether the class is required or elective. A communicative, content-

based approach has the potential to engage the students intellectually and utilize their shared interest in the subject matter and/or task at hand to collaborate better. This fits Robinson's argument that "as tasks increase in cognitive complexity, approaching the authenticity of target task demands, there is no loss of interest in or motivation to complete the task" (Robinson, 2001, 49).

When teaching classes at different levels, many teachers automatically demarcate between tasks for higher-level students and tasks for lower-level students, with the tasks for higher-level students deemed "too difficult" for lower-level students. Upon further reflection, though, whatever the specific rationale (e.g., "too dense," "too long," "too complex") may be, the difficulty in question is actually difficulty facing the teacher rather than the students (e.g., not enough time, lack of proper equipment, too many students). Robinson labels this as *task complexity*, to be distinguished from *task difficulty* (Robinson, 2001, 31). The key lies in the teacher's ability to modify the parameters of the task to match the capabilities of the students (Melvin & Stout, 1987, 50).

What I wanted to learn from this experience was not whether or not I could conduct parallel courses employing the same syllabus at considerably different levels, but rather how the students and I would react and adjust as the semester went along. To be specific:

1. Would I be able to complete the same basic one-semester syllabus in both classes? Most courses I teach are completely of my own devising, and all materials are either provided by me or created by me. Thus freed from external constraints created by departmental syllabi, testing schedules, and text materials, I am always free to adjust the pace of my lessons according to the students' response. If they are particularly receptive to something, I can allot more classroom time to it ; if something gives them more trouble, I can either slow things down to

make sure they understand or wind up quickly and move on to something else. Dealing with such different levels at the same time, would it be at all possible to maintain the same pace? More importantly, would that be desirable?

2. How would I address the level difference in terms of task design? Would I be able to assign the same basic activities, with the same objectives, to both classes? What adjustments would have to be made, both on the spot and in general?
3. If and when the pacing of lessons diverged, how would I adjust? Would the Challenge students end up with a richer syllabus? Would I set more modest goals for the Support class?
4. Would the level difference influence my marking and grading throughout the semester? Some argue that it is logical for higher-level classes to have more AA and A's than lower-level classes, but that assumes that motivation and not proficiency is the main criterion for placement. This being new students in a new department, motivation was not at all a factor in placement.

METHOD

My Study Skills class was subtitled "Links to Learning." The underlying concept was that the various topics, materials, and activities that go into a course of study comprise a network of interrelated elements. "Links to Learning" is made up of parallel streams: one begins with a song and a painting and the other is a series of lessons studying the song and painting and then extending to a range of other topics through a variety of integrated English-language tasks. A mindmap used as part of the final examination (Figure 1) shows how all of these topics and activities are interrelated. Below is the outline of target skills for the semester :

LEVEL	SUPPORT	REGULAR	CHALLENGE
Target Skills	・Basic classroom language ・Question-making ・Gist listening ・Identifying key words ・Categorizing	・Collaborative learning & pair/group discussion ・Note-taking vs. dictation ・Outlining ・Summarizing ・Distinguishing between subjective & objective ・Presentation-making	・Advanced note-taking ・Paraphrasing ・Group discussion ・Academic research ・Self-editing

The starting point was Don McLean's 1972 song *Vincent*, which uses Vincent Van Gogh's painting *The Starry Night* to pay tribute to the Impressionist painter and his tortured life. From there, the course diverged in several different directions, including student presentations about their favorite artists (*artist* meaning either painter, musical artist, or other kind of artist), analyzing the lyrics of *Vincent*, listening to other songs by Don McLean, and studying about Van Gogh's life and works. From there, each branch forked out to several new tributaries–e.g., the presentations led to lessons on public speaking skills, how to be a good audience, criteria for peer feedback, designing original presentation feedback forms, and how to give constructive criticism; studying the song started from listening comprehension and branched out into lessons on poetic conventions such as rhyme, imagery, and alliteration; and studying about Vincent Van Gogh led to a tripartite analysis of "Vincent the Artist," "Vincent the Man," and "Vincent the Superstar." What appear on the surface to be completely disparate topics and activities–e.g., alliteration in the naming of commercial products and the concept of parody–are at least indirectly linked through the course, and the final examination asked the students to make the connections.

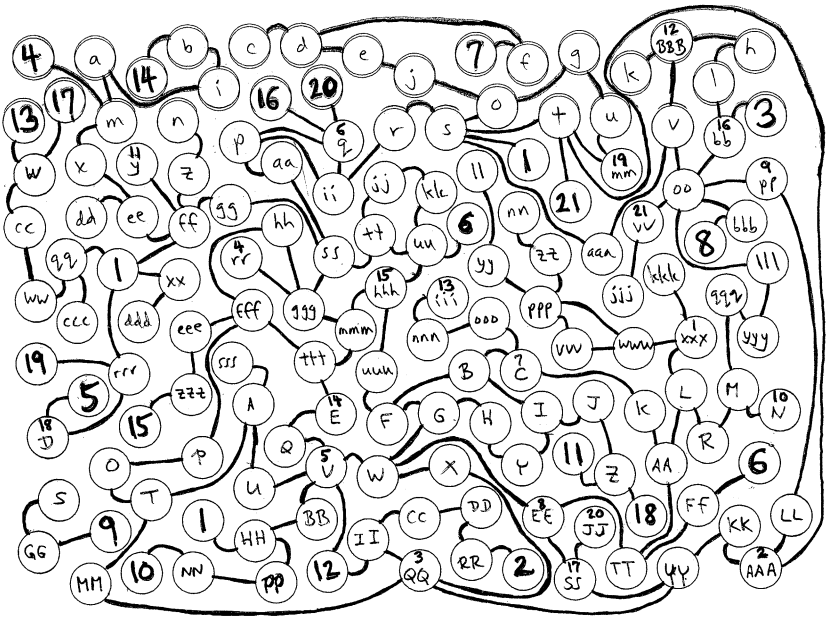

Figure１：Mindmap of Study Skills Course Content

I provided all classroom materials. In addition to Don McLean's original version of *Vincent* (on both CD/MD and videotape/DVD), cover versions by other artists, and other songs by Don McLean, the teaching media included films (three biographical movies, one fantasy movie, and three documentaries about Van Gogh, together with music videos and a variety of related short videos, and other movies about famous painters), books (Van Gogh picture books, Susan Herbert picture books featuring her parodies of famous paintings substituting cats for human subjects), my personal collection of merchandise featuring the *Starry Night* motif, and more music (other songs about famous painters or paintings). Homework was not limited to traditional reading listening assignments, and included Internet research, conducting a survey, visiting a Van Gogh exhibition in Tokyo, and designing merchandising products.

The communicative approach would enable me to avoid a straight grammar approach (Littlewood, 1981, 88-89); at the same time, however, a content-based approach would ensure that structure would not be overlooked (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 1989, 2-3). One critical objective, keeping in mind the need to clarify how university study differs from high school study, was to introduce and foster the concept of student autonomy among the students (Nunan, 1997, 194-196). This extends to both macro-level (collaborative learning, independent learning) to micro-level objectives (speaking out voluntarily, asking questions). One other critical objective is transforming the classroom from a controlled environment in which all communication is contrived, with the students doing what the teacher tells them to do, to a place where the students engage in authentic communication, speaking with each other in English for authentic communicative purposes (Galien, 1995, 161, Rivers, 1987, 10-11). The precise nature of that communication will vary with the class and level (Rivers, 1987, 4-5, Kramsch, 1993, 3-4), as well as the balance between content and language involved in carrying out the task (Quock, 1996, 140-141).

The continuing debate over "fluency vs. accuracy" came up while the new curriculum was being organized, with some teachers arguing that first-year required English should comprise or include a review of junior high school English grammar. Indeed, Brown (2005), argues that "The U.S. government estimates that 1,410 hours of study will be required to attain a 'limited working proficiency' in Japanese for highly motivated, well-educated adult Americans attending the Foreign Service Institute and it does not seem likely that a typical Japanese college student, despite some previous exposure to English orthography and vocabulary, would require much less than that" (11). That might be true if there were a greater correlation between communicative competence

and grammar/structure, but there is a significant difference between false beginners and absolute beginners. The amount of English encountered every day by the average Japanese (in both listening and reading)–combined with the enormous number of English loanwords appearing in everything from standard conversation Japanese to the jargon of various professional fields and the English used in the news media and on the Internet−bears powerful testimony to the amount of English the average Japanese knows, if only in the form of passive knowledge. Consider that self-contained English expressions such as “Thank you,” “Bye-bye,” “Start”/”Stop” and “Cheese” are de rigueur for millions of Japanese who will insist in the same breath that they can’t speak English at all. The content-based, communicative approach constantly reminds students that, no matter what their level may be, they are already capable of communicating in English *within their means*.

OBSERVATIONS

Each class had 19 students. At first glance, there were some obvious general differences between the two classes:

- The Challenge class demonstrated markedly better English skills (especially listening and speaking); many students in the Support class were unable to produce more than one sentence at a time, and I constantly had to repeat and paraphrase whatever I said with the support students. The balance came in the students’ role–I was able to push the Challenge students to speak among themselves in English more, and to be more meticulous in my demands on their oral and written production.
- The Challenge class exhibited greater motivation throughout the semester, with more students having perfect attendance and doing most of the homework assignments.

- The Challenge students also showed greater confidence, often asking questions and speaking out voluntarily. One guideline for student presentations called for three follow-up questions from the audience; the Challenge class always managed to come up with at least three questions, while it was often a huge effort to elicit even one question from the Support students.
- Demographics might also have played a role, as the Challenge class included two international students (both from China) and a number of students who had lived abroad for at least one month before (two of the Japanese students had studied abroad for at least one year). At least in part because of that, the Challenge students also had a broader range of life experiences, interests, and general knowledge. It should be noted as well that most of the Challenge students joined a one-month homestay program at the University of California in Davis soon after the semester ended, which might have stimulated their motivation somewhat; the Support students were eligible to join a similar program to be held the following February, after a full year of study.
- Overall, the pacing of both classes was about the same–I sometimes found myself able to go more deeply into things with the Challenge class than with the Support class, or assigned more homework to one class or the other, but all in all I never felt that I was being rushed with the Support class, or that I needed to speed things up with the Challenge class.

Three Challenge students had other special problems: one often kept to herself and was consistently very quiet during lessons (She is later referred to in this paper as Student A.); two others had non-academic issues that significantly affected their classroom and homework performance (one was carrying two jobs in order to pay for her tuition

and room & board and, when she went to class, was usually not totally attentive; the other rarely seemed interested in classroom proceedings). In terms of English knowledge and skills, all three of these students were in the right level; they were easily capable of keeping up with the rest of the class, but seemed to be distracted by their private issues.

Below is a listing of the major activities conducted during the Spring semester, 2005. I was able to do essentially the same lesson in both classes throughout the semester, albeit sometimes with significant adjustments.

ACTIVITY	CHALLENGE LEVEL	SUPPORT LEVEL
Topic : Self−introductions Task : Introduce self, choose next speaker, ask follow-up questions. Study skills : ・Public speaking ・Question-making ・Speaking out voluntarily	・Very few problems. ・Many asked follow-up questions.	・A few students had difficulty saying more than their names. ・Several asked follow-up questions.
Topic : Don McLean song *Vincent* Task : Write reaction paragraph after first listening. Study skills : ・Extensive listening ・Note-taking ・Reaction writing	・Most wrote one paragraph. ・Three had heard the song before and one knew basically what it was about.	・Two could write only one sentence, in which they expressed their feelings while listening but made no comment about the song per se.
Topic : *Vincent* Task : Listen to lyrics, discuss content. Study skills : ・Intensive listening for key words ・Categorizing key words	・Few problems catching keywords. ・Students were quick to identify kinds of information and how it was organized.	・At first some said they couldn't catch anything, but after a while most could catch key words.

・Note-taking ・Vocabulary building ・Guessing from context		
Topic : My Favorite Artist Task : Give oral presentation (individual or pair), ask follow-up questions, complete assessment form for homework, including constructive criticism. Study skills : ・Individual oral presentation ・Outlining ・Listening comprehension ・Question-making ・Peer evaluation ・Speaking out voluntarily	・6 opted for pair presentations. ・One student was so nervous she couldn't answer simple follow-up questions. ・Never less than 3 follow-up questions. ・Students designed their own evaluation forms. ・9 students submitted evaluation forms (i.e., including constructive criticism) for at least 10 of 16 presentations.	・8 opted for pair presentations, 2 did not give presentations. ・Several students only read from manuscripts with no awareness of audience. ・Often no follow-up questions. ・Students designed their own evaluation forms. ・5 students submitted evaluation forms (i.e., including constructive criticism) for at least 10 of 16 presentations.
Topic : *The Starry Night* Task : Describe the painting to a partner, who tries to sketch it. Study skills : ・Making physical descriptions ・Listening comprehension	・Very active and productive. ・Some sketches were surprisingly detailed.	・Very active and productive. ・Some sketches were surprisingly detailed.
Topic : Alliteration Task : Brainstorm for alliterative pairs, including names of people/characters, places and products (e.g., Mickey Mouse). Study skills : ・Brainstorming	・Very active and productive. ・Some early confusion between pronunciation and spelling, and some problems with consonant clusters.	・Very similar results, although the Challenge students were able to come up more

·Vocabulary building ·Pronunciation/Phonetics		
Topic : Rhyme Task : Analyze rhyme scheme in some popular songs, brainstorm for rhyming pairs (e. g., payday). Study skills : ·Brainstorming ·Vocabulary building ·Pronunciation/Phonetics	·Most knew 2-4 of 4 songs (*Do－Re－Mi*, *Silent Night*, *Yesterday*, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*).	·Most knew only 1-2 of 4 songs.
Topic : Rebuses Task : Solve rebuses about food and drink. Study skills : ·Brainstorming ·Vocabulary building ·Lateral thinking	·Very engaged and active.	·After initial puzzlement, very engaged and active.
Topic : *Vincent* Task : Analyze lyrics. Write conclusions for homework. Study skills : ·Reading comprehension ·Discourse analysis ·Paragraph writing ·Group discussion	·10 students submitted follow-up homework.	·5 students submitted follow-up homework.
Topic : Van Gogh Exhibition Task : Visit the museum, submit a written report. Study skills : ·Essay writing ·Writing about the abstract	·14 submitted reports (those who submitted reports were reimbursed for admission). ·All reports submitted received A or B grades.	·11 submitted reports (those who submitted reports were reimbursed for admission). ·All reports submitted received A or B grades.
Topic : Vincent the man, Vin-	·2 did written reports	·7 did written reports

cent the artist Task : Conduct research on Van Gogh's life and works in the library or on the Internet Study skills : ·Academic research ·Extensive reading & intensive reading ·Summarizing ·Group discussion	(homework was simply to do the research).	(homework was simply to do the research).
Topic : Vincent the superstar – merchandise bearing the *Starry Night* image or a likeness Task : After viewing existing goods, design new ones and give a presentation about it Study skills : ·Creative thinking ·Brainstorming ·Group oral presentation	·14 students opted for group presentations, none for individual.	·16 students opted for group presentations, none for individual.
Topic : Parody songs (Michael Jackson's *Beat It*, Weird Al Yankovick's *Eat It*) Task : Narrate music videos to a partner, compare/contrast original videos/songs with the parodies. Study skills : ·Narration ·Listening for key words ·Comparison/contrast	·Very animated and lively atmosphere.	·Very animated and lively atmosphere.
Topic : Works of artist Susan Herbert	·14 students wrote essays.	·12 students wrote essays.

Task : View collected paintings, discuss them, write essays critiquing them Study skills : ・Group discussion ・Outlining ・Essay writing/Process writing ・Self-editing ・Critical analysis	・All received A or B grades.	・8 received A or B grades.
Topic : General knowledge of Van Gogh Task : Conduct a public opinion survey, submit a written summary of the findings, give a presentation. Study skills : ・Conducting a survey ・Question-making ・Brainstorming ・Outlining ・Essay writing/Process writing ・Self-editing ・Summarizing ・Group oral presentation	・All participated. ・A couple of summaries were very well done.	・All but one student participated. One summary was exceptional.
Topic : Movies and documentaries about Van Gogh Task : See selected films in the university self-access center and write a comparison/contrast report. Study skills : ・Extensive viewing/listening ・Outlining ・Essay writing/Process writ-	・15 submitted essays. ・All received A or B grades.	・13 submitted essays. ・9 received A or B grades.

ing ・Self-editing ・Critical analysis ・Distinguishing fact from fiction (Subjective vs. objective) ・Comparison/contrast		

DISCUSSION

The Support class initially showed either a negative reaction or no reaction to most activities. In my opinion, this was force of habit rather than authentic reactions. As can be seen above, they eventually managed to carry out most activities, albeit not necessarily what many would consider "successfully." Students have been conditioned to define *success* and *failure* as whether or not you can use the right target structure in the right situation or answer the teacher's question correctly. From the skills standpoint, the main objective of the activities was to gain experience from trying, so there many questions were subjective in nature and there were often no right answer(s) to get (or miss). Using more subjective questions of course opens the door to a greater number and variety of unforeseen answers, but that eventually proved to be a positive rather than a negative. Many of the students didn't–and perhaps still don't–understand the difference between objective and subjective questions clearly but by the end of the semester only a few students in either class (one in Challenge, two in Support) had never spoken out spontaneously. The use of subjective as well as objective questions, combined with the fact that I don't generally appoint students to speak or answer questions, gradually led them to worry less about making mistakes and begin to take risks. I was generally quite satisfied with the effort put forth by the Support students, and as a result the majority of

them received passing grades.

The question of *fluency vs. accuracy* will always arise, and some might question how a content-based approach could affect the Support students' knowledge of English because their command of grammar and structure was limited to begin with. The answer is a diagnostic approach that focuses on relevant grammar as it arises naturally within the context of the lesson, rather than having the course content driven by a predetermined and therefore contrived grammatical sequence (Brinton, 1989, et al., 3, Long, 1987, 58).

With the exception of presentations, all in-class speaking was on an impromptu or extemporaneous basis. The Challenge students were capable of doing most tasks largely or completely in English, but the Support class was slow to undertake any speaking activities among themselves, even if I made clear that they were permitted to begin in Japanese. When it comes to communicative activities and all of the inherent intangible factors attendant to them, results are usually difficult and often impossible to perceive. However, they should be easier to perceive when the students' starting point is lower. This held true with the Support class on this occasion.

- Three students had assumed natural leadership roles as conversation/discussion group leaders and project heads by the end of the semester.
- Several students who were extremely lacking in confidence at the beginning of the semester became more relaxed as the term progressed. This was most likely also influenced by the students coming to know and trust me more as time went by.
- One student who was previously not very motivated suddenly changed her attitude in the middle of the semester and began to speak out, often when no one else would.

Even in the Challenge class, some students were very tentative at the outset of the semester. In contrast to the Support class, however, more of them were able to approach me directly to ask questions from the beginning of the term. Changes among the Challenge students were harder to perceive. The most obvious change was among those who gradually came to understand my approach to teaching and what I expected of them. I generally give partial instructions and leave it to the students to work out among themselves how exactly to proceed. Even highly motivated adult learners are usually unfamiliar with this approach and tend to be confused when they begin taking lessons from me, and this is even more true of younger, less confident students who are accustomed to being passive learners.

Looking back at the questions posed at the beginning of this study, here are some of the answers I have been able to find so far:

1. I was able to complete the same syllabus with both classes. As many of the component parts were in themselves designed as one-period lessons, I was able to treat much of the syllabus as a series of related, yet largely self-contained, lessons. As a result, I was able to make the necessary adjustments within each lesson in order to avoid getting too far ahead with the Challenge class or falling too far behind with the Support class. There were no complete lessons that I conducted only with one class or the other.
2. I was generally able to assign the same tasks to both classes. One occasion on which that approach didn't work out well was in a humor-based lesson focusing on double meanings. I had anticipated that setting up the basic concept of puns (in this case, how the English pronunciation of *Gogh* rhymes with the word *go*) might take up most of the lesson, and I had a worksheet prepared as a follow-up homework assignment. The Challenge students clearly grasped the concept of

the joke, but only a few of the Support students did well on the worksheet.

3. The pacing of lessons was often quite different, and I constantly found myself repeating myself more and giving more help to the Support students. This did not prove to be quite as necessary with the Challenge students, although it did give me the luxury of being able to recap the major points of some lessons simply because I had the time to do so. The only significant deviation was in the final analysis of the lyrics of *Vincent*. After going over the mood of the conclusion and how that compared with the rest of the song, I had time for the Challenge class to study the lyrics and look for indications of how the mood shifts from positive to negative in both the verses and refrains.
4. I found no difficulty in grading. The range of grades within each class accurately reflected performance throughout the semester, especially in terms of motivation and effort. The final grades were as follows :

	CHALLENGE CLASS		SUPPORT CLASS	
AA	6		3	
A	6		3	
B	3		3	
C	4	・2 borderline failures	6	・1 borderline failure ・1 clearly unmotivated student
F	0		4	・1 attended only 2 lessons ・1 stopped attending in the last month ・2 had sufficient attendance but consistently spoke and wrote very little

While the Challenge class results were fairly consistent with results for that level in the old curriculum, the Support class results were actually somewhat better: in the old curriculum it was almost unheard of for even one student to receive a AA grade, and it was not unusual for a

third or more of the students to fail. It can be concluded that motivation among the Support class students did not seem to have been adversely affected by the course content and/or pacing of lessons.

CONCLUSION

Every time I look at a class of first-year university students, it strikes me how their bearing immediately separates the girls from the women–hair styles, makeup and other physical differences aside, some have a sense of maturity and confidence, while others seem shy and intimidated by their new surroundings. This is in part a measure of their preparedness to deal with the unexpected: how will university differ from high school? Are university teachers different from high school teachers? Are they more demanding? Will it be harder to make friends than before? The unexpected is an even greater factor for students from abroad or from distant places in Japan, students who are living away from their families for the first time, students living alone for the first time, and students who plan to pay for at least part of their university education through part-time work.

The Study Skills course, as an introduction to university life, should help students overcome some of their anxieties about the unexpected. As such, increasing the students' knowledge of English and improving their English proficiency are not the only objectives–intangible factors such as motivation, self-confidence, and sense of autonomy should also be targeted. Furthermore, some kinds of learning will not always yield immediately perceptible results. Indeed, the efficacy of English I may be best determined by the students' performance in subsequent classes. Furthermore, most of the Support class were scheduled for a one-month homestay program at the University of California in Davis soon after completing the fall semester. Clearly, Study Skills is only the first step

in a four-year process that should be studied carefully as the new curriculum is phased in.

I was generally satisfied with this experience, particularly with the Support students' ability to keep pace with the Challenge students for most of the term. I was constantly making adjustments, but that is to be expected with an approach that deliberately invites the unexpected into the classroom. The unexpected played its customary role in every lesson throughout the term–perhaps most unexpectedly, I did not feel that teaching parallel courses at different levels created many additional challenges for me. Teaching second-year courses the next year should provide a bountiful basis for comparison and contrast, as my second-year classes will be one-semester content-based elective courses with no level designations. I look forward to seeing how many students from the first-year Challenge and Support classes register for each semester, and how they perform during the term.

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